

## STUDENTS' PERCEPTION OF THE QUALITY IN THEIR INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION

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**Abstract:** The purpose of this survey based study is to identify and investigate whether my students (during the teaching of discipline <Fundamentals of Information Science>) were enough aware on the quality of their interpersonal communication as well as on the factors influencing it and on the ways to improve this communication. This qualitative study investigated the perceptions of 102 students (65 males; 37 females), aged between 22 and 25, about their communication with their colleagues, parents, educators and future employers.

**Key Words:** quality, interpersonal communication, survey, questionnaire.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Most of the students of our department/ faculty (Electronics, Telecommunications and Information Technology) of University "Politehnica" of Bucharest – all engineers-to-be in Electronics and Information Technology - are introduced in the field on Information Engineering mainly by two basic disciplines entitled "Theory of Information Transmission" (taught since years '60) and "Fundamentals of Information Science" (taught since 2007). These are two complementary approaches, both contributing to enriching the students' knowledge, to develop their skills and to induce some of their new attitudes and behaviors.

On the other side, we are aware that student perceptions, beliefs, motivations, and attitudes (anticipating behaviors), are constantly changing. As educators, at any grade or level, it is our responsibility to measure these variables, continuously, in order to enhance the learning environment, to better know students' needs and expectations and, finally, to provide quality education to our students.

### 2. THE MODEL OF A GENERAL COMMUNICATION SYSTEM

Process of <communication> is one of the basic processes studied by the Information Science. A worldwide known model of communication is the so-called <Model of a General Communication System>

developed in 1948 by Americans Shannon and Weaver, in their basic work entitled *Mathematical Theory of Communication*. Based upon some concepts, models and theories provided by Americans Nyquist, Hartley and Laswell, its authors gave to word <communication> a very broad sense in order to include "all procedures allowing to one mind to affect another mind" (as for example, by written or verbal messages, by sounds or images, etc.). Weaver proposed to classify all possible problems of communication in three categories:

- a *technical* problem: how accurately can be transmitted the symbols of communication's message?
- a *semantic* problem: how precisely do the transmitted symbols convey the desired meaning?
- an *effectiveness* problem: how effectively does the received meaning affect conduct in the desired way?

He recognized that all these categories of problems are closely interrelated and overlapped in a "rather vague way"...Shannon himself stated that "the semantic aspects of communication are irrelevant to the engineering aspects"! "But this does not mean that the engineering aspects are necessarily irrelevant to the semantic aspects" – commented Weaver! Today, this fundamental work – known also as *Shannon's Information Theory* – is considered as "an attempt to quantify the movement of signal through space and time" (Debons).

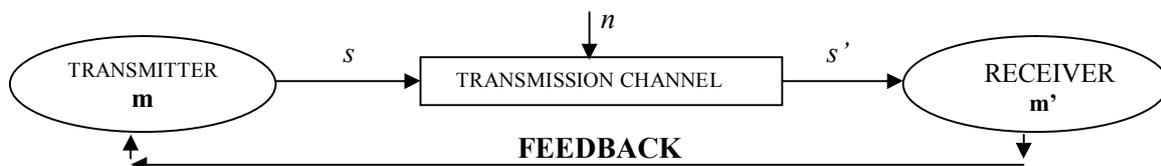


Figure 1. Classical model of communication and information transmission processes [1]

After 60 years, it is now obvious that this model (Fig.1) and its concepts are fundamental in order to understand and solve only technical problem of

communication (as for example those related to channel efficiency and optimization of signal-noise ratio). Semantic and effectiveness problems of

communication have to be solved by Information Science....

According to this model, an *information source* generates a *message m* (containing generally selected written and / or spoken words, sounds, images, etc.). This message is conveyed by a corresponding *signal s* (converted from *message*, by *transmitter*) through a *channel*, to the *information user* (where the signal is converted back into a message, by a *receiver*). The signal *s* – as information immaterial conveyor – may be affected during its propagation through the transmission channel by the noise *n* (a general special concept including all possible unwanted impairments of signal and affecting its quality). This model included a feedback loop that was introduced later by Norbert Wiener - “the father of cybernetics” - in order to optimize the communication between source and user (since, thanks to *n*, signals *s* and *s'* as well as messages *m* and *m'* may be quite different...).

Within our daily life, the terms <information> and <communication> are often considered synonymous, so that the expression <information communication> may be considered as being redundant.

According to a social model called <information cycle>, *information communication* (or, simply, **communication**) is an *information transfer*, i.e. a movement of meaning. It has not to be confounded with the *information transmission without intent*, representing purely a *conveyance of energy*. In other words, *communication is an information transfer or an information transmission with intent*.

<Communication> may be seen also as a *knowledge transmission*, i.e. as a conveyance of understanding. Consequently, <communication> is a very complex social and psychological phenomenon investigated for many decades, by a lot of researchers, around the world.

<Quality of communication> may be defined as its “fitness for use” according to needs and expectations of its participants. [2] Ineffective and/ or inefficient communications may be very frequent and may generate many important problems.

## 2.1 What is <interpersonal communication>?

<Interpersonal communication> (*IC*) is the process of sending and receiving information between two or more people. IC may be subdivided into <dyadic communication>, <public speaking>, and <small-group communication>.

<Dyadic communication> is simply an IC method involving only two people (as for example a telephone conversation or a set of letters sent to and received from a pen pal). [1]

IC is the universal form of communication that takes place between two individuals. Since it is person-to-person contact, it includes everyday exchange that may be formal or informal and can take place anywhere by means of words, sounds, facial expression, gestures and postures. In this IC process, sender can immediately receive and evaluate feedback from the receiver. This feature allows for more

specific tailoring of the message and more personal communication than do many of the other media.

The IC process involves four basic elements:

- <the sender> (i.e. the person who sends information),
- <the receiver> (i.e. the person who receives the information sent),
- <the message> (i.e. the content of information sent by sender) and
- <the feedback> (i.e. the response received from receiver).

<Communication channels> are representing the medium chosen to convey the message from <sender> to <receiver>; they can be categorized into two main categories: <direct channels> and <indirect channels> of communication.

<Direct channels> can be easily recognized by the receiver and are under direct control of the <sender>. In this category are included the <verbal> communications (including <written> and <spoken> communications, both using words) and <non-verbal> communications (which do not require words, like for example certain overt facial expressions, controllable body movements, significant colours or sounds, etc.). <Indirect channels> are usually recognized subconsciously by the <receiver>, and are not always under direct control of the <sender>.

<Context> of communication refers to the conditions that precede or surround the communication. It consists of present or past events from which the meaning of the message is derived. Ultimately, context includes the entire world, but usually refers to salient factors such as the following:

- Physical milieu: the season or weather, current physical location and environment
- Situational milieu: classroom, military conflict, supermarket checkout
- Cultural and linguistic backgrounds
- Developmental progress (maturity) or emotional state
- Complementary or contrasting roles: boss and employee; teacher and student; parent, child, and spouse; friend or enemy; partner or competitor. [1]

## 3. SURVEY QUESTIONS

- 1.1. Which are the *interpersonal communication problems* that students like you are frequently facing?
  - 1.2. Which are, in your mind, their *main reasons/ causes* of these problems?
  - 1.3. Which are, in your opinion, *the best possible solutions* able to solve these problems?
- 2.1. Give at least five examples of *ineffective communication*.
  - 2.2. Which are, in your approach, *most important conditions* enabling effective communication?
  - 2.3. Which are, in your opinion, *the main obstacles* hindering the communication effectiveness?

**4. STUDENTS' ANSWERS** (listed in decreasing order of their weightings within received answers)

<b>4.1.1 - BASIC PROBLEM: Ineffective and/ or inefficient interpersonal communication</b>		
	<b>4.1.2 - Causes</b>	<b>4.1.3 - Solutions</b>
<b>I) STUDENTS' COMMUNICATION WITH THEIR COLLEAGUES (in class/ residence, etc.) → 95%</b>		
<b>1</b>	- Different educational backgrounds - Reciprocal distrust - Social divide - Lack of communicational skills	- Harmonisation of students' attitudes and behaviors through negotiation, development of mutual trust, establishment of consensus-based behavioral rules - Development of social/ communicational skills and induction of socialization attitudes and behaviors
<b>2</b>	- Students' stress during their exams' session	- Preparing exams long time before exams' session
<b>3</b>	- Difficult communication between students belonging to different structures and generations - Leaders of students' associations are not good communicators or have other personal priorities	- More and better electronic communication + better use of existing technologies (data bases, forums, groups, use of standardized e-mail addresses, etc.) - Establishment of an effective alumni association
<b>II) STUDENTS' COMMUNICATION WITH THEIR PROFESSORS (FACULTY) → 82%</b>		
<b>1</b>	- Lack of students' feedback communication	- Appropriate motivation of professors and students
<b>2</b>	- Terminology and verbal expressions used in some courses are difficult to understand	- Explanation of concepts' and terms' meanings. - Simplification of verbal expression; more questions...
<b>3</b>	- Some verbal information provided by professors arrive too late, is incomplete and/ or do not reach its intended receivers	- More and better electronic communication (forums, groups, use of standardized e-mail addresses, etc.) + better use of existing technologies
<b>4</b>	- Some classrooms are not equipped with multimedia equipment and/ or their acoustics is (very) poor - Preference of some professors for the strategy <memorizing> instead of <understanding>	- Generalization of the use of video-projectors and other multimedia educational equipments; classrooms' acoustics improvement - Exams assess mostly students' knowledge and skills rather than their information.
<b>5</b>	- Ambiance noise generated continuously by some colleagues during courses and workshops	- Leave of classroom by not motivated students
<b>III) STUDENTS' COMMUNICATION WITH THE TECHNICAL STAFF OF UNIVERSITY → 75%</b>		
<b>1</b>	- There are many communication difficulties of students with staff members (i.e. secretaries, technical officers, librarians, house keepers, etc.) – waiting lines, too short students' contact time-schedule, reject of some students' requirements, etc	- More and better electronic communication (forums, groups, use of standardized e-mail addresses, etc.) - Practice of transparent time-schedule by all staff members - Appropriate motivation for better communication
<b>2</b>	- Poor websites design (at levels of faculty and chairs), despite the better website of university	- Improvement of websites' design in order to facilitate students' communication with professors and staff
<b>IV) STUDENTS' COMMUNICATION WITH THEIR PARENTS → 34%</b>		
<b>1</b>	- Separation of students and their parents – living in distant locations – during the higher education time interval	- More and better electronic communication + better use of existing technologies (e-mail, messenger, Skype, SMS, mobiles, etc.)
<b>2</b>	- Lack of communication between parents and university representatives	- Motivation of both parties for such communication - Use of existing electronic technologies
<b>V) STUDENTS' COMMUNICATION WITH THEIR POTENTIAL EMPLOYERS → 12%</b>		
<b>1</b>	- Scarce direct communication of students with their potential employers	- Motivation of employers for such communication - More opportunities for direct communication (visits and stages in companies, scientific and technical meetings and workshops, etc.)
<b>VI) STUDENTS' COMMUNICATION WITH THE MANAGERS OF FACULTY/ UNIVERSITY → 5%</b>		
	- Some students are not allowed to express their needs, expectations, feedbacks and complaints related to educational processes.	- Establishment of a representative and effective association of students, enabling them to communicate efficiently with managers of faculty/ university
	- Sometimes, students' personal data are disclosed publicly (without intent)	- Training of managers and technical staff on existing confidentiality regulations

**4.1.2 Examples of situations enabling an ineffective communication**

- Some *websites* do not allow the bidirectional communication between users and owner, do not include contact data and/ or the site map, do not contain relevant information and/ or even essential data (dead lines, mail addresses, names, etc.), are not regularly updated and/ or have a poor graphical and structural design (so that searching and finding

appropriate data is a difficult and time-consuming process), etc.

- Sender has obvious verbal / written expression difficulties and/ or employs unknown terms and/ or ambiguous expressions, so that the message is not enough clear and understandable
- Sender and Receiver are mutually distrusting one another
- Information debit and/ or redundancy and/ or voice loudness – in direct verbal communication – are too high

- Sender's topics of communicated messages are not enough interested for the receiver
- Almost everybody speaks but nobody is listening

#### 4.1.3 Conditions enabling effective communication

- Both Sender and Receiver know enough well the language of message
- Sender knows well WHAT and TO WHOM he/she communicates
- Goal of communication is clear, objective and not biased.
- Sender's message is structured and sent in accordance with the characteristics of adopted language, of Receiver and of used channel
- Sender's ideas are enough clear and concise before formulating the message.
- Received message does not contain perceptible noise and/ or perturbations
- Received message is correctly interpreted in conformity with the context of communications
- Both Sender and Receiver are aware that they have to improve the quality of paraverbal and nonverbal communications
- Communication between Sender and Receiver is bidirectional (including feedback)
- Both Sender and Receiver want to communicate and are committed to act and react proactively, within the communication
- It is advisable to build sentences using the pronoun "I" as subject (<the language of responsibility>), to practice the active listening and to avoid redundancies, stereotypes and prejudices.

#### 4.1.4 Examples of situations enabling an ineffective communication

- Surrounding noise, network noise, light, meteorological phenomena, etc. – are most common factors disrupting the communication. Unfortunately, they are not under our control...
- Other obstacles which may contribute to the lowering of communication's effectiveness may be: speaker's fear, speaker's reduced or too technical vocabulary, speaker's location (in respect to listener's location) , length of the event/meeting, temperature/ lighting of communication room, etc.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

Interpersonal communication is the universal form of communication that takes place between two individuals. Since it is person-to-person contact, it includes everyday exchange that may be formal or informal and can take place anywhere by means of words, sounds, facial expression, gestures and postures.

In interpersonal communication there is face-to-face interaction between two persons, that is, both are sending and receiving messages. *This is an ideal and effective communication situation because you can get*

*immediate feedback.* You can clarify and emphasize many points through your expressions, gestures and voices. In interpersonal communication, therefore, it is possible to influence the other person and persuade him or her to accept your point of view. Since there is proximity between Sender and Receiver, interpersonal communication has emotional appeal too. *It can motivate, encourage, and coordinate work more effectively than any other form of communication.* Also, in a crisis, through interpersonal channel, flow of information is tremendous e.g. news of violence, famine or disaster.

Interpersonal messages consist of meanings derived from personal observations and experiences. The process of translating thoughts into verbal and nonverbal messages increases the communicator's self-concept. In fact, *effective interpersonal communication helps both participants strengthen relationships through the sharing of meaning and emotions. Many variables affect the interpersonal relationships.* These are *self-disclosure, feedback, nonverbal behavior and interpersonal attraction. Our success or failure in handling these variables, determine how satisfying our interpersonal relationships will be.*

- *Self-disclosure* lets others know what we are thinking, how we are feeling and what we care about. Self-disclosure helps reduce anxiety, increase comfort, and intensify interpersonal attractions.
- *Feedback* is the response of a receiver that reaches back the sender. It involves agreeing; asking questions and responding through feeling statements.
- *Nonverbal behavior* plays an important role in interpersonal communication. A smile, a hug, a pat, a firm handshake, etc. can achieve much more than words in certain situations. Eye contact, gestures, posture, facial expressions, etc. are also important elements of our nonverbal behavior.
- *Interpersonal attraction* is the ability to draw others towards oneself. Some people are said to have magnetic personalities. People are drawn to them. It is this special chemistry that causes 'love at first sight'.

My students' answers to the survey were enough pertinent in order to demonstrate their knowledge and their concern in the field of interpersonal communication and its quality.

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